

**UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA FAIRBANKS  
ART DEPARTMENT**

# Genesis

BFA Degree Thesis Exhibition Report

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Growing up on a tropical island, Roatán, off the coast of Honduras in Central America, I was never without a black, plastic disposable camera firmly clenched in my hand. I weaved and bobbed through the mangrove trees on our property at the water's edge taking photos of everything. To feed my camera addiction, I would go upstairs to my Nana's house in the afternoons when I got out of school and would brush her long-haired ragdoll cat, Sinbad. Each day that I combed through his thick cream hair I earned two lempiras- the Honduran currency. I guarded my stash of lempiras in "Piggy"- a homemade pink piggy bank I constructed out of a round oatmeal container with four stubby paper towel roll legs, a yogurt cup for a nose and pink curled pipe cleaner for a tail.

Taking photos is something I have loved for as long as I can remember. I'd never have guessed the disposable cameras I ran around with would one day turn into a viable career opportunity. At the young age of five, I distinctly recall thumbing through family photos and knowing I had something special in my hands. My Nana was an off-Broadway actress and model in New York City. I remember a series of incredible photographs from one of her fashion shoots. She was pressing her pointer finger to her red lips- you could almost hear her saying "shhh". Her slender figure was adorned in floral patterned silks; her perfectly white curly hair matched her white leather gloves and an enormous black-haired wolf stood by her side. She was playing the role of grandma in a modern adaptation of Little Red Riding Hood for a fashion spread. These images transported the viewer to another world- and I loved that. I wanted to be transported to all these fantastical worlds. But, pre-composed fantasy was not the only genre to catch my attention.

Growing up in the 90's, wallet sized photos were traded like playing cards, a new school picture was sent out to everyone in the family every school year, along with special occasion photos, such as baptisms, first communions etc these holiday cards were often personalized with family photos. I kept every single one of these images we received in the mail in a plastic green folder that I still have it to this day in a special box of keepsakes. I regularly thumbed through the photo albums my mother had put together of my early childhood and let myself get lost in the memories of those moments. There is an image of me as a tiny, active baby with my great grandmother who was over 90 years old at the time. I am resting in her lap as she sits in a well cushioned floral patterned armchair in a mustard yellow cardigan and my little hands are

clenched around a long strand of pearls hanging from her neck. There is a playfulness in the image; her eyes are locked on mine and I imagine how magnified her eyes might have appeared to me as an infant with her thick glasses perched at the end of her nose, as I look up at her with an open mouth- probably making some sort of cute baby sound. My mother took the photo and her mother was also there. It's the only time we have ever had all four generations in the room at one time. There is something magical about capturing a single and fleeting moment in an image that you can keep forever. I love the idea of being able to revisit the exact moment with clarity.



My fascination with photography started early but I never pursued photography exclusively until much later on in life. In the beginning, I was just simply in love with art itself. My mother, Cecilia Manriquez, graduated Misericordia University with a BA in art and unintentionally ignited a creative spark within me as a young child. When I was 2 years old, my mother worked at Pam's Party Planning in NJ. I often went to work with her because my parents weren't able to afford childcare. She was predominantly the gift basket designer/maker but also made centerpieces for parties and was involved with the set-up and decoration on location for large events as well as making balloon sculptures. Pam's Party Planning was located on the

second floor of an old Victorian house. Being in a party planning business with all the shiny ribbons and balloons and things to touch was a goldmine as a toddler and an absolute nightmare for my mother. I always brought my favorite toys and coloring books to keep me occupied when I went to work with her but everything else caught my attention. I would slyly start to explore the color ribbons on spools, my mother's back to me while she worked diligently on a project at her desk and without even turning around she would sternly say, "Sarah... don't you even think about it..." Perplexed and frustrated, I would usually go back to my toys. But, how did she know? "I have eyes in the back of my head," she would always tell me. I remember standing at the back of her office chair, digging through her brown curly hair looking for the extra set of eyes that always knew when I was getting myself into trouble.

It wasn't long before my toddler shenanigans became too big of an issue for them to be overlooked by Pam. I had a tendency to pick up the phone when it rang and listen in on Pam's business phone calls, forget the phone was off the hook during their conversation and then continue playing with my toys in the background. Eventually, my mother was asked to leave. She bounced around from job to job- looking for any sort of employment that would allow her to bring a child along. She worked as a laundress at a laundromat, a children's babysitter at the gym and eventually worked nights so when my dad got off work, he took over kid duty and she would head into work.

I moved to Alaska in August 2012 from Tampa, FL to Fairbanks where I worked as a tour guide for Northern Alaska Tour Company for several years. I originally started my college career at the University of New Mexico as a Foreign Language major but left in pursuit of a dream job I had been offered with Barbizon USA, LLC in Tampa, FL. I never had any intention of not finishing my college education. So, after settling into Fairbanks, I decided I would apply to the University of Alaska Fairbanks and finish the remaining portion of my foreign language degree and move on with my life- little did I know that being accepted to UAF was going to start a powerful trajectory in my life's story arch that would empower me, break me and build me up again over the course of 5 years.

I still have my cardstock acceptance letter from UAF that I received in the mail- it hangs on my refrigerator door. Students often joke on campus about UAF's acceptance rate; there was

even a satire article written by the school's newspaper, The Sun Star teasing that UAF made their first rejection. But, for me, acceptance into the school was nothing short of a miracle and a second chance I had been starving for. I didn't leave the University of New Mexico on good terms.

I was a graduate of Barbizon Modeling and Acting School and worked my way up in the company from a promotions model to representative to a traveling representative to a peer trainer to being offered the corporate trainer position for the marketing department of the company with an all costs covered moving package to Tampa, FL and I did in under a year. I was the youngest person to have ever been brought onboard the corporate team at the age of 20 years old. They made the official offer to me in October of 2011 in the middle of the semester. They wanted me to start by the second week of December 2011. I explained I was a college student and asked if it was possible to wait until the end of the semester...their answer was short and curt, "We need you by the second week of December, do you want the job or not?". This attitude speaks volumes to my entire experience there. But, I wanted the job. I spoke with all my professors at the time and told them about this incredible job opportunity I had just been offered. I wanted to know if there was any way I could take my finals early or remotely or if there were any possible options to explore.

Over 27,000 students attend the University of New Mexico. I was just one number out of many, as they prodded cattle through to graduation. Most of my instructors congratulated me on my new position and politely reminded me by accepting the position, I had already made my decision and demonstrated my priorities with my education and they would do the same. I received an F grade for every class that semester which tanked my almost perfect GPA to a 1.9. Turns out 18 credits of F's can do some serious damage. I was accepted to University of Alaska Fairbanks on probation due to my low GPA that I brought with me from UNM. It was still a fresh start and a second chance and I was ready to prove myself. I wasn't 18 anymore and college meant more to me this time around. I was sacrificing so much more in order to be a full time student.

I was nervous about my re-entry in college. I came onboard with part time status and focused on a single class- introduction to ceramics with professor Jim Brashear in the fall of

2014. I had been warned by every adult with a college education who ever met me since I left UNM how difficult it is to go back to school and graduate. The statistics of other's past failures floated around in my head as I entered the ceramics studio and found a stool at one of the work tables. I glanced around the table at all the new faces- I forgot how hard it was to make new friends.

Jim Brashear came into the room, greeted the class and passed out the syllabus. A raise of hands gave him an idea of who had experience with clay and who didn't. I was surrounded by a room full of young, bright minds fresh out of high school who raised their hands with confidence and I was immediately intimidated as I was the only person in the room admitting to no prior experience with clay- why did I think this was a good idea?

Jim then rolled out four 50-gallon barrels of clay to each large canvas covered work table and said, "You have until the end of the class period to use every single bit of clay in these barrels and make something. I will judge the best piece at the end class. Go." Each work table was a group. My group immediately got to work slapping clay onto the walls and building a massive tree. All the other groups were properly preparing the clay and pounding and rolling it before use. My group aggressively got as much clay out of the barrel and onto the wall as possible. We stood on stools to get it up onto the wall as high as we could and then placed another stool for the roots of the tree to crawl off of the wall and down the stool leading to the floor. Two hours later, we had a 12 foot tree taking over the wall with three-foot roots wrapping around a stool, all of our initials carved into the trunk of the tree, each leaf individually veined and textured and every tiny bit of clay from our barrel gone. Jim announced our group as the winner and then gave a lecture on breaking down the barriers of traditional rules that dictate how we interact with the clay and not allowing those rules to take away from our creativity. My mind was blown. This was nothing like my college experience at UNM. Immediately after class I called my Nana and said, "You will never guess what I did in class today, I'm definitely in the right place..."

It wasn't until the summer of 2015, that I made my way to the photography department and took my first photography class with adjunct faculty member, Jason Lazarus and enrolled in his "Basic Digital Photography" course. Jason's class was more like a grueling photography boot

camp but it laid a solid foundation of skills and knowledge for me to grow. I left the class with several award-winning images and a body of work that still regularly makes it into juried exhibitions around the country. This was the first formal class I have ever taken in photography and the first time I was in full command of my digital camera as an instrument to make art versus a magic black box I pressed “click” on.

The following semester in fall 2015, I was enrolled in photography professor, Charles Mason’s “Digital Darkroom” class and I learned how to print my work. But, I wanted more practice and a challenge that made me uncomfortable and took my first real bite into photojournalism and I started working for The Sun Star as a freelancer. By the end of the semester, I was the Photo Editor for the newspaper and enrolled in the 2015-2016 Snedden Chair’s photojournalism class in the spring 2016 semester under Richard Murphy. I was finding my niche in the art department, the photography world and on campus.

I knew I wanted to be a part of the BFA program and was just biding my time until I earned enough resident credits to be eligible. I had found my home in the UAF art department and was eager to focus my studies in photography, video and sculpture. In spring 2018, applied to the program and was accepted.

Every once in a while you stumble across someone who helps set the stage for everything that will follow. I have been lucky to meet and work with a handful of mentors at UAF who changed the trajectory of my life. In the 2018 spring semester, I enrolled in the 2017-2018 Snedden Chair’s special topics photography course under Katie Orlinsky. The project I started in her class for an assignment is the birth place of my thesis work now. We were given a class assignment to photograph a social issue and this is where my journey began. I was interested in documenting homelessness but I wanted to approach the topic in a way I had never seen it presented before.

When you think of the homeless what do you envision?

Who do you see in your mind?

Are they dirty? Are they panhandling on a street corner? Are they drunk? Do they look unbathed? Are they mentally ill?

Are you afraid? Are they people you would avoid on the street? Would you be nervous about your children getting too close?

I was homeless for 3 years.

When I think about the homeless, I reflect on some of the hardest times of my life, the enormous challenges that were presented before me and the insurmountable obstacles I needed to overcome to find home.

I set out to photograph homelessness through a lens of my experiences. Most people who have experienced homelessness have kept at least one item, something small- usually something they might be able to wear or put in a pocket. I think of this item as a hope talisman and have found that it usually was given to them by someone who made them feel very loved. I worked locally with the Fairbanks Rescue Mission- the only overnight emergency shelter in the Interior. I made black and white hand portraits that take an intimate look into the hearts of our most vulnerable neighbors and the items they have kept despite losing all other worldly possessions. A great deal of this work is dedicated to humanizing the homeless. This body of work is called “My Home in My Hands”.

Homelessness in Alaska is an often misunderstood, complex and growing problem that deserves to be explored in depth. I wanted to address many of the stereotypes surrounding homelessness more directly. Through the “My Home in My Hands” project I met Felicia Cavanaugh, a homeless woman in the Interior of Alaska. Over the last several years I have documented her life and her journey out of homelessness. I chronicled her life through my lens in still images and video. Through the power of film and photography her story shines a new light on homelessness and aims to dispel popular myths about the causes of homelessness. This body of work is called, “Genesis”.



The work still didn't feel complete. I had concerns about my voice being too present in the work. Yes, they are my images. But, I was interested in education and advocacy and wanted to remove myself from the work as much as possible and make sure the issues at hand were at the forefront. Felicia is one of many who face or have faced homelessness in Alaska. Often, the homeless and other disenfranchised groups lose their ability to control their own narrative. Their stories are constantly being told for them and not by them. After quite a bit of research, I found a nation wide project that combated just that. The Through Our Eyes project encourages participants to tell their own stories the way they want them presented in the world. Disposable cameras were given to local people in Fairbanks who were experiencing homeless this past August with one simple instruction- photograph your life.

“The purpose of the Through Our Eyes Project is three-fold: emotional, physical and spiritual. We want to provide joy in creating art. We want the photographers to feel the gratification that comes with being part of something bigger than they are. We want to provide awareness & support. We want communities to engage with different groups of people, learn how to love them and support organizations who serve them. We want to provide hope for those who are hurting.” (Williamson) The photographs remind us that we all share the human experience no matter our circumstance.

How do we solve homelessness? It's a question almost every community has asked. The issue is multifaceted and the answer is complex. The complex nature of the issue drove me to make multiple bodies of work discussing their own themes. After many discussions with local organizations who work extensively with our homeless populations as well as asking people who have faced homelessness themselves, I asked them to give me a single word that captures some of the core ideas, constructs and elements that would help prevent homelessness. This collection of words has manifested in little wooden magnets and displayed on the surface of a house facade. Each word represents one idea, that had it existed or had been attainable or available then one person would not have been homeless. It's the beginning of a much longer conversation of how we move forward to solving the issue at large. As you remove magnets for purchase from the house, you reveal the faces of the people who are helping.

I am working with four organizations in Fairbanks that address homelessness in its many interconnections with related community challenges: 1) The Fairbanks Rescue Mission, the only overnight emergency shelter in the interior; 2) Breadline Inc and Stone Soup Cafe, which serves over 125 meals to food insecure members of the Fairbanks community everyday; 3) The Door, which focuses on homeless youth; and 4) The Fairbanks Housing and Homeless Coalition (FHHC), which brings together community non-profits to address Fairbanks homelessness at large.

Genesis focuses on a journey. We follow Felicia on her journey as she navigates her way out of homelessness. It was important to me that the images were not installed traditionally and anchored to the wall. This journey isn't static and I wanted to be able to give the viewer the ability to walk alongside Felicia in the gallery space. The installation of the work was critical to accomplish this- this was about more than just sequencing the pieces but about how the work would be experienced. Well designed installation "usually allows the viewer to enter and move around the configured space and/or interact with some of its elements, it offers the viewer a very different experience from (say) a traditional painting or sculpture which is normally seen from a single reference point." (Collins) To accomplish this, I hired woodworker Scott Holladay to build spalted birch frames that could be suspended from the gallery ceiling for the exhibition.

I was inspired by the installation of Edward Steichen's "Family of Man"- 503 pictures from 68 countries created by Edward Steichen for the Museum of Modern Art. "The Family of Man was much more than the sum of all the images it featured. It offered an unusual visual experience. Made-to-order enlargements of various sizes were arranged as if on a magazine page, contrasting large images with smaller ones. The spatial arrangement of the exhibition added a distinct architectural aspect. The different sizes of the prints provided a dynamic rhythm of distinct emphases and background. The unframed prints were mounted directly on panels, some of which were free-standing and removed from the wall, some others – hanging from the ceiling or arranged on a circular platform. These panels extended into the viewers' space and created a visually interesting landscape that visitors were invited to explore. Their progress through the exhibition was limited to the route planned by the organizers because the panels

were arranged in a maze-like way that guided visitors through the thematic sections from the entrance to the exit.” (Tifentāle)



The frames for Genesis were designed in such a way that they allowed me to display two images using a single frame. Since the images are suspended there is no *back* of the frame so both sides can be used to display work. The frames covered only two sides of the photograph leaving the top and bottom exposed and free of wood. The images were mounted onto plexiglass to give them support and rigidity. They were then slid into pre-cut slots within the frame, compressing the two images back to back in the middle and were secured with custom metal rivets that drove through the plexiglass. I was scheduled to exhibit the work at Well Street Art Company in May 2020 and was meant to have the center gallery with the low ceiling.

The show was designed and sequenced so certain groups of images would be viewed together and some stand alone. There are a total of 24 images displayed in 12 frames. The images are printed on Moab Entrada Natural paper and are approximately 20x16 inches with white space left at the bottom of each print. The white space is used for captioning the images. Not every image has a caption. And, the images that do have captions typically describe the grouping of photos that they are displayed next to and grouped with. The captions are handwritten and worded in first person- they help provide additional narrative to the images.

I designed the layout to invite the viewer to walk among and around the work. Due to the design of the layout, intimate spaces are created for viewers to experience several images at a time that focus on different ideas. For example, Felicia Cavanaugh tries to visit her son, Justin Cavanaugh at least once a week at the Fairbanks Correctional Center. There are three images that

discuss this moment 1) The first image sets the sense of place and depicts Felicia and her son behind a heavy metal closed door where visiting takes place. 2) The second image brings us inside the room with Felicia and illustrates how this mother and son communicate over the phone and through glass at a typical visit. 3) The third and final image in this grouping is a close up of Felicia's fingers pressed against the glass. Felicia has not held or been able to touch her son for over 5 years. This grouping of images is displayed in an L shape- two images suspended side by side and one image perpendicular, creating the 90 degree angle for the L shape. These L and I shapes were strategically mapped to create a maze-like experience for viewers as they traverse the gallery. A few special considerations for installation of the work revolve primarily around the suspension of the frames and distancing between the different groupings. I wanted the groupings of frames to be close enough to create an intimate viewing place but far enough apart that the artwork is safe and not in jeopardy of getting knocked into. The frames were constructed to be as light as possible with a cable design to make leveling the pieces as easy as possible.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic the work will not be exhibited at Well Street Art Company in May 2020. But, I am hoping that I can reschedule the show with David for a future date in 2021.



There were a thousand steps I climbed before reaching this point- before completing the BFA thesis project and being so close to earning my bachelor of fine arts degree with a concentration in photography and film at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. I am elated to be writing to you at the end of this five year journey. In pursuing the BFA program, I wanted to take steps towards preparing myself for a career in the art world. My journey at UAF has been filled with a lifetime of thought provoking challenges and hands-on experiences forged by special educators. I am walking away with a competitive skill set and the confidence to successfully navigate the art world and find my place. And, many of those steps were taken outside of the classroom.

I served as the director of the UAF Frozen Lenses Photography Club for 4 years. Under my leadership the club hosted its first ever city wide juried photography exhibition in 2016 at Venue in downtown Fairbanks. In 2017, Frozen Lenses put together the club's first ever group exhibition in the UAF Art Gallery with over 50 images hanging on the wall. We reinvigorated the Peter MacKeith Memorial Photography exhibition as a juried show under local adventure photographer, Seth Adams. Before our revival, the exhibition had not taken place for a number of years. We published a hardcover exhibition catalogue and timed it's release to accompany the opening reception. In April 2017, the club hosted its first ever statewide juried exhibition at Ursa Major Distilling under the esteemed official Iditarod photographer, Jeff Schultz. Only 20 images were accepted into the show from artists all over Alaska. The club hosted Schultz on campus where he gave a public talk in Schaible Auditorium and he conducted portfolio reviews for photography students.

The Frozen Lenses Photography Club continued to evolve and host more complex and diverse exhibitions over the years that included multimedia artists and were not limited to photography based mediums. It is the mission of Frozen Lenses to provide a forum for photographers of all abilities to connect and collaborate. Frozen Lenses fosters education and creativity through a multifaceted approach incorporating regular meetings, hands on demos, instructional group outings, national academics conferences and club organized public exhibitions. Our vision was to offer not only our members but the greater Fairbanks Community- resources, education, experience and support. We envision a future in which the art students at

UAF have closer relationships with galleries and working artists nationwide. By hosting our group and juried exhibitions we provide a key stepping-stone into fostering these relationships.

I have curated and coordinated 5 different group and juried exhibitions through the club over the years. I feel comfortable in a gallery space and am able to sequence new work quickly and get pieces installed in new and innovative ways. In October 2018, we hosted our largest exhibition yet with 92 pieces filling the UAF Art Gallery for *The Witching Hour*, an invitational multidisciplinary exhibition. The exhibit included sculpture pieces suspended from the ceiling of the gallery, a special video installation, unique lighting and sound. We sequenced and installed the show in a single day.

I served as the photo editor for the *Sun Star* for several years. I originally came onboard as a freelancer looking to sharpen my journalism skills through my lens. Each week we produced and printed a 4-12 page paper that was distributed throughout campus. I won Best Portrait at the Alaska Press Club conference in 2016 for my portrait of visiting artist, Cannupa Hanska Luger who was carving a clay ocarina in the grad studios on Halloween. The *Sun Star* afforded me the opportunity to photograph the start of the Iditarod and the start of the Yukon Quest. I have freelanced for the *Juneau Empire* and submitted images and articles to other various newspapers around the state. And, I have been the official photographer for the Tok Race of Champions for the last 4 years.

I have exhibited my work in galleries all over the state and have been repeatedly featured in competitive juried exhibitions like *Alaska Positive* and *Rarefied Light*. I have participated in over two dozen shows nationally and was selected for my first international juried exhibition in PH21 Gallery, a contemporary photography exhibition space in Budapest, Hungary. In summer 2019, my image “*The Blue Locker*” was selected by juror Michael Behlen as best in show in L.A. Photo Curator: Global Photography Awards’s exhibition “*Lost at Sea*”. I presented my first solo exhibition of work, “*Finding Home*” at the International Gallery of Contemporary art in December 2019. I was selected to exhibit, “*Through Our Eyes*” at The Bear Gallery in February 2020.

My work has also been published in *Scribendi* and *The Palouse Review*, two national

honors student academic art publications. My images have also been featured in Art Ascent, Dark Beauty Magazine and multiple issues of the CLA's annual Clarity Magazine.

I was a 2020 Artist of the Year Finalist through the Fairbanks Chamber of Commerce. Three artists including myself were selected as finalists and the Fairbanks Chamber membership voted at their annual meeting to select the winner. I did not walk away with the 2020 Artist of the Year Award but it was an enormous personal victory to be held in the same company as seasoned professionals and well respected artists like Somer Hahm and Jamie Smith.

I served as the digital photo assistant to official photographer, Jeff Schultz in the 2019 & 2020 Iditarod International Sled Dog Races. I traveled 1,000 miles with Jeff through remote Alaska via small plane and on a snow machine in Alaska's arctic tundra. Jeff Schultz is an Iditarod legend and well known wildlife and landscape photographer in Alaska. The 2020 race marked his 40th year down the trail. Everyday of the race posed new challenges, difficult deadlines and harsh weather conditions.

There is so much forward moving momentum in my imaging career at the moment and I want to keep that trajectory accelerating onward. As the saying goes, the more you know about something, the more you realize you know nothing about it at all. Who knows what the future will hold for me, but with my undergraduate degree in hand, I will start by knocking on MFA graduate program doors and continuing to feed my education.

Over the course of these 1000 steps I learned, I grew, and my work evolved. From the inception of the photograph to transcending ideas throughout a body of work. These experiences shaped my thesis work from top to bottom. And, I discovered that whether I was photographing form studies of the nude female figure in a perfectly lit studio or handing out disposable cameras at the local soup kitchen- there was one uniting theme that grounded all of my work. I have an innate and deep-seated desire to explore resiliency of the human spirit. I want to explore our capacity as humans to spring back from the things that have broken us. I want to capture how a strained spirit can recover and rebound. How do we rebuild? Where are the boundaries of our elasticity? What shapes unfold as we recover from deformation? Who are we when it's all over? Here's to a lifelong exploration of what it means to be human and capturing it through my camera lens.

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